

## Nora Chipaumire: Back for Live Lab and Live Performance

BY GEORGE FISHMAN |

CATEGORIES:



Miami-Dade College has brought challenging choreographer and charismatic dancer Nora Chipaumire to Miami for a month of workshops called Live Arts Lab at the New World School of the Arts (courtesy of a Knight Foundation grant). Dance professionals and students were keen to participate, because Chipaumire is nurturing, but probing. She's also playful, with a hearty laugh.

As Michelle Grant Murray, a teacher and choreographer, recalled from the first Lab session: "A young lady was asked to describe the one thing that hurt her most in life, and everyone in the room took a deep breath. It caught me off guard. Oh, we're going *there!*"

Students came prepared with the assigned reading list, their own choreography "sketches" and familiarity with Chipaumire's work. But *her* focus is on the students: "I want you to find yourself and to make yourself vulnerable, which I think is an odd word to use for a choreographer," said Chipaumire.

"This is a place where conversation opens between the person watching the piece and the person doing the piece, which I think is a critical thing we're missing now in the contemporary arts: this dialogue between the observer and the performer ... if it is a dialogue or conversation, one person isn't permitted to just check out."

That applies to public performance too, where vulnerability yields intimacy, which marks engagement.

By the third session, Murray was challenging herself "to really delve in and pull myself from just face value — from skin value, from bone value, from blood, organ, from a deeper place that we don't recognize, but are really interested in trying to find out."

During one Lab exchange, Chipaumire asserted that what you perceive while dancing is usually slower than what the audience perceives. "Performance time versus audience time." That's why it's valuable to record and study videos, like an

athlete.

Questioned about the role of virtuosity, Chipaumire responded that the “wow factor” can be de-humanizing, “not allowing for mistakes, which I think are also very beautiful and open a door to a dialogue.” Another strategy for holding the audience.

The artist’s critical acclaim includes a Bessie for *Chimurenga* and another for her work with the Urban Bush Women dance company. She has received a variety of commissions, awards, fellowships, film roles and other credits. Much of her choreography deals with immigrant issues and with debunking stereotypes about the African continent.

Having emigrated from Zimbabwe 22 years ago, Chipaumire’s “neither insider nor outsider role” provides a privileged vantage point. “Not belonging allows you to be slightly objective and to comment on it. I think there’s something to be said about that condition of being ‘other’ that helps a creative person.

“When I first arrived I was more interested in fitting in, and disappearing — not wanting to attract attention, wanting to ‘pass’ as just any black person. Slowly I became aware of my Zimbabwe-ness *and* what I’ve acquired.”

While her own background was working class, her performances draw mostly elite audiences. “I had to reconcile with the fact that the immigrant population is the least likely to come and see the work, because they hold five jobs,” she observed. “It’s not for everyone, and that’s ok.”

At the end of June, Miami audiences will get to see a “very, very raw” preview of Chipaumire’s latest work, currently in development at MDC. It’s called *rite riot*. She didn’t reveal much about it, but this *is* the centenary year for Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. She focused instead on presentation of Lab participants’ works-in-progress. That performance will be accompanied by discussion “to show the thinking behind the work and some of the strategies that we’ve used. I’m really hopeful that the work we are creating here is not just studies that will just sort of die after we’re done, but that we are actually driving towards having real work that can have a life of its own.”

Meanwhile, she is also taking a break from touring *Miriam*. “I would call it a documentary. It is also an installation; it is theater; it is performance; it is dance.” Based on the powerful Miriam personae — from Old Testament sister of Moses to the Madonna to South African civil rights activist and singer, Miriam Makeba — it comes to Miami in February, 2014.

Both the teacher and her students frequently invoked the term “implicate.” It means to reveal yourself as a human being in your work. “How does Nora Chipaumire really behave in this situation?” she explained. “As opposed to ‘I’m just a dancer with no face, with no thought, with no opinion.’ The people making the work have to implicate themselves in the work. The work has to be risky for them, too.”

*Live Arts Lab – Final Showing; June 25 at New World School of the Arts, 25 N.E. 2nd Ave., 8th floor, Miami; at 6:00 p.m.; free; 305-237-3010; www.mdclivearts.org.*